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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature on individualized instruction in writing centers and other places reveals several histories, theories, and rationales for such instruction. Suggested models of instruction emphasize the progress of the individul through conferences, individualized assignments, high levels of peer interaction, and grade negotiation. The best programs are identified as those that offer an eclectic, inductive, team-designed approach to teaching composition, focusing on writing as an ongoing learning process. The worst programs are considered to be those focused on grammar and mechanics and those that are machine or program centered. Despite the many advantages that have been credited to individualized instruction, a number of objections have also been raised, including isolation from peers, superficial individualization and a fragmented presentation of modules. The number of studies that have examined the effectiveness of individualized instruction yield no consensus since many of the studies are flawed in design and inconsistent in their results. In fact, the bulk of the literature concerning individualized, self-paced or auto-instructional writing courses is subjective and highly interpretive, suggesting a need for further studies of the effectiveness of individualized and classroom modes of instruction. (HOD)

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INDIVIDUALIZED WRITING INSTRUCTION IN AMERICA:

A REVIEW OF THE RECENT LITERATURE

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The number of descriptions, syllabi, and general discussions of individualized instruction in writing centers, writing labs and tutorials is legion (representative are Arena, 1975; Bopp, 1974; Harris, 1976, 1982; Hartwell, 1980b; Kobler, 1976; Kremenliev, 1974; Registad, 1980; Roberts, 1979b; Walker, McHarque, McClure & Adams, 1974), but the professional literature reveals few scientific studies of the effects of individualized writing instruction, and those produced conflicting results (Calderonello, Heim, Hart & Quinn, 1981), leaving the basic question of the effectiveness of individualized writing instruction unanswered.

This paper will survey the history of individualized instruction; it will develop a theoretical rationale for such instruction, while noting objections that have been raised; and it will review experimental studies of the effectiveness of individualized instruction. The experimental studies reviewed here will show inconsistent results in spite of the strong theoretical argument that can be developed in favor of individualized instruction, suggesting that the present literature review and additional research are desirable attempts to resolve the controversy over the effectiveness of individualized writing instruction.

Three recent books provide the interested reader various views of individualized instruction conducted in writing centers and other places, but without objective assessment of the effects of the method on growth in writing quality. The first is New Directions for College

Learning Assistance (Hawkins & Brooks, 1981), favorably reviewed in College Composition and Communication (Brostoff, 1982). The other two deal with individualized instruction in writing laboratories in high schools and colleges. The first is the Writing Laboratory: Organization, Management, and Methods (Steward & Croft, 1982), a useful guide to organizing and maintaining a writing lab; the other is an anthology of essays about the theories and operation of writing labs, Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs (Harris, 1982).

A HISTORY OF INDIVIDUALIZED WRITING CENTERS

The literature reveals several histories of individualized instruction in America. According to LaConte and LaConte (1970), modern student-centered instruction may have begun in Great Britain's school system, where individualized instruction is achieved within the classroom as students plan and organize their own writing assignments and where "the English teashers' contention that regular grammar lessons and constant correction never will lead to either fluency or precision of expression" (p. 22) prevails. Other histories are heavily biased toward study skills centers and grammar instruction. One such study, that of Devirian, Enright and Smith (1975), indicated that of more than 3,300 campuses surveyed in 1974, more than 767 had some type of learning center, nearly all formed since the mid 1960's. The number of writing centers had grown to about 1,000 by 1981 (Brostoff, 1982). Redish and Racette (1979) report that the oldest continuing writing laboratory in the United States was begun in the late 1920's or early 1930's, at the University of Iowa. Like most other writing labs, it is eclectic in its pedagogy and serves as a supplement to composition courses offered by classroom instruction. Labs have sprung up because

of shifts from teaching literature to teaching writing in freshman English courses, report Redish and Racette, who cite several innovative writing programs in their report on training document designers. Perhaps the best history of the individualized method of writing instruction is offered by Martin (1981), who predicts a flourishing future for individualized methods of teaching freshman composition in America.

The Personalized System of Instruction (PSI), developed by Keller (1968) and adapted to linguistics instruction by Fasold (1974), was the basis of one of the first individualized writing programs in the United States (Witte, Ryba & Davis, 1975). A similar method of instruction was developed in the mid-seventies for second-language acquisition in Zambia (Roberts, 1974, 1976, 1979a) and Malawi (1974); and the SPICE Center, an individualized writing center at a West Virginia college, shares many characteristics with other personalized/individualized modes of instruction (Roberts, 1979b, 1982a, 1982b) without the isolation James Moffett (1981) and Frank Smith (1981b) find in some programs following the PSI model.

A RATIONALE FOR INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

If writing is seen as an ongoing learning process, then it can easily be viewed as a process of thinking (Perron, 1978), not as a product, but as an activity (D'Angelo, 1977). Writing may even be viewed, metaphorically, as a second language (Neilson, 1980), growing in the use of language while growing through language (Coles, 1978), or, simply, "knowing-how" (Winterowd, 1975).

The "knowing-that/knowing-how" distinction introduced by Winterowd (1975) is made clearer by a modification of Stephen Krashen's

(1978) monitor theory: acquisition (knowing-how) is building the "skills of ethos, pathos, and logos through input and feedback;" learning (knowing-that) is the building of "arhetorical skills through rules, algorithms, paradigms and programmed exercises" (Winterowd & McElderry, 1980, p. 14). Knowing-how in writing is acquired best in courses designed to "respond individually to each student's writing" (Fisher & Murray, 1973, p. 169). On the other hand, the authors of many so-called "individualized" writing programs who want their students to know-that have created programs that appear to be inflexible, with highly structured modules like Wilcott's (1980); are concerned primarily with surface detail error-eradication as in Street (1977), Idstein and Carey (1979), Schillie (1980a, 1980b, 1980c), Limback (1980), and Morrow (1980); or are grammar-and-mechanics labs with no college credit (Bennett, et al, 1977), that major on the presentation of arhetorical skills only incidental to the cognitive processes of writing, or knowing-how. Such concentration on the surface features of writing prevents the emergence of the student's ideas (Glassner, 1981), ignores the underlying reasons for errors (Barritt & Knoll, 1978), and fails to recognize that some errors may be a result of the student's inexperience with the print code (Hartwell, 1980a).

The work of researchers like Linda Flower and John Hayes is combating the impoverished view of writing evidenced in programs with a narrow emphasis on error. Bonnie Meyer (1982) hails their work concerning the nature of planning in the writing process (Flower & Hayes, 1981a). Their work includes problem-solving (Flower, 1981; Flower & Hayes, 1977), invention (Flower & Hayes, 1980), and a cognitive process model of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981b), which maintains that writing

is "a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer's own growing network of goals" (p. 366). Their work clearly supports the concept of writing as a series of mental processes, a concept important to the "theoretic context" (A. Freedman, 1982) of writing-as-process approaches to individualized writing instruction.

A MODEL OF INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

Unlike the conventional classroom models of instruction, which often require all students to proceed at the same rate, individualized instruction allows students to work at their own pace, as individuals. Conventional models of instruction such as the one shown in Figure 1 define progress in terms of group progress (Witte, et al, 1975). Individualized instruction allows individual progress and interprets learning on an individual basis (Figure 2). The conventional classroom model of instruction places little emphasis on individual students and maximum emphasis on group progress, group assigned tasks, instructor mediated activities, and group testing. The individualized model of instruction emphasizes the progress of the individual through conferences, individualized assignments, high levels of peer interaction, and grade negotiation.

Provision for individual learning differences (Shaughnessy, 1977) and individual writing goals (Holzman, 1982; McKay, 1981) are important advantages of individualized instruction in the writing process. Writing projects and other assignments should be tailor-made for individuals (Daiute, 1981; Garrison, 1973) in an environment where "the teacher is never the center of attention" (Collins & Morgan, 1982,

p. 202), or not necessary (Elbow, 1973) -- or not even present (Fisher & Murray, (1973). Such an environment grows out of the assumption that "it is possible to learn something and not be taught (because) the student can function without a teacher" (Elbow, 1973, p. ix), and out of an understanding that tailoring assignments individually "is not so much good teaching as good learning" (Fisher & Murray, 1973, p. 173). Such an environment also grows out of a concept of language learning as an on-going process not restricted to -- but sometimes restricted by -- the conventional classroom (Smith, 1981a).

Because of behavioral objectives mandated by state departments of education, students in the conventional classroom are often forced into a mold of compliance with teacher-centered, even bureaucrat-centered instruction (Moffett, 1981). Individualized instruction, while potentially mechanized by the student who desires isolation and minimal instructor and peer contact, remains a flexible, liberating, and humanistic approach to college composition courses -- primarily because individualized instruction can provide the kind of supportive learning environment suggested by Joan Lickteig (1981), an environment too seldom found in the college classroom serving large numbers of students.

James Moffett (1981) prefers to avoid the term individualized instruction because of the connotations of programmed materials and visions students sitting off by themselves in carrels, dutifully working through programmed materials. He prefers the term student-centered instruction. Student-centered instruction is more difficult than conventional approaches even though, as Moffett puts it, "it's also terribly hard to teach the conventional way" (p.28). Student-centered instruction is mentally and physically exhausting, but at the same time enormously powerful,

wielding "far more than the power of the grade in a typical class" because of the dramatic improvement in writing and because of the relationship between thought and language (Sides, 1977, p. 12). The 28 composition teachers Sides interviewed said the greatest advantage of an individualized method of teaching composition is the ability to focus directly on the individual student's unique writing needs, accounting for a dramatic improvement in student writing.

Other advantages of student-centered writing instruction, whether termed individualized or tutorial, are immediate feedback on student comprehension, improvement in the student/teacher relationship and student attitudes toward the course, more opportunities to write, and, of course, improved writing. The best programs seem to be the eclectic, inductive, team-designed approach to teaching composition, focusing on writing as an ongoing learning process (Laque & Sherwood, 1977). The worst programs, according to Frank Smith(1981b) and James Moffett (1981), are those focusing on grammar and mechanics, and are machine- or program-centered. Moffett calls for a complete individualization:

> We need an honest, deep, thoroughgoing individualization in the sense that learning really accommodates individual differences in people as they vary both by background and by personal makeup. That includes a tremendous amount. It covers the differences in ethnic and familial upbringing, the incredibly varied uses of language and dialects in different families and ethnic backgrounds. Then you get into differences in personality: what people understand by different words, what experiences they've had, which things they have or don't have concepts for, even the different sense modalities which individual students learn best from -- the auditory, the visual, the motor-oriented, the kinesthetic.
>
> If we give these differences the critical attention they deserve, then we must have a much broader spectrum of materials, methods, media, et cetera, that kids can learn from. If we don't, we're simply not individualizing.
>
> (1981, pp. 27-28)

Objections to Individualized Methods

Patricia Cross (1976) hints that students make individualized instruction a success or a failure for themselves. She says that active, inquisitive students are more successful in courses using individualized instruction methods than are passive students. However, students are not passive slaves to habit, but active learners, so it is more likely that the failure is not the fault of the student at all, but the failure of the instructor to focus on the cognitive reason for the errors instead of the errors themselves (Barritt & Kroll, 1978); or the failure of the instructor to recognize the underlying psycholinguistic basis of writing so instruction can be tailored to meet the diagnosed needs of the students (Daiute, 1981). It may be that the failure is in the instructor's enslavement to a program (Smith, 1981b). Or, it may be that teachers make students passive by talking too much and allowing too little language interaction (Collins, 1981).

Some of the other dangers of individualized instruction were discussed by James Moffett during a 1974 interview conducted by David Sohn for Media and Methods, and reprinted in Coming on Center (Moffett, 1981):

> I think for education to improve it's going to have to go very, very far in the direction of individualization, but an individualization quite different from the way the word is generally used. I think it got preempted very early in the game by narrowly programmed materials, so that right now it often means learning small things in small steps. My impression is that these materials -- usually with a behavioristic approach -- take all students through the same program, except for some differences in pacing. Basically they are doing the same things in the same order, and I think that's a fraud and a terrible misleading of the public. It gives the impression that we have done something that we haven't.
>
> (p. 27)

Isolation from peers and instructors is often cited as a main objection to individualized instruction (Brannon & Harris, 1978; Lunsford, 1978), and with good reason, because many individualized programs, especially second-language acquisition programs, are designed for administrators and teachers, not learners (Showstack, 1980). An even more serious problem of many individualized writing programs is that they lack an adequate theoretic foundation (Freedman, 1982); often such programs are attacked because of their apparent success (Rocerick, 1982), or simply because they are innovative (Bruffee, 1981).

Still others (Cohen & Poppino, 1975), cite superficial individualization and a fragmented presentation of modules as major difficulties with self-paced, individualized instruction, recommending that the best features of self-pacing, genuine individualization, and group interaction be combined, using the student's own writing as the basis of learning. Frank Smith (1981b) persuasively argues that learning "programs," individualized or not, "are by their very nature piecemeal, unmotivated, standardized, decontextualized, trivial, and difficulty-oriented" (p. 638). Nevertheless, "because of the pressures to self-pace from the administrative superstructure or from the effects of overcrowding or staggered admission policies, it is probably unrealistic to say that self-pacing will disappear from two-and four-year colleges"(Cohen & Coppino, 1975, p.3).

Experimental Studies of Individualized Instruction

In view of the strong theoretical rationale developed above, it is not surprising to find numerous studies of the effectiveness of individualized instruction. It is difficult, however, to draw a

consensus from the experimental literature; studies are flawed in design and inconsistent in their results.

One of the most thorough investigations of individualized instruction was conducted by Epes, Kirkpatrick and Southwell (1979a, 1979b, 1980, 1982) at several locations of the City University of New York. Termed the Comp-Lab Project, the study assessed the effectiveness of a laboratory-centered basic writing course and concluded that the "Comp-Lab course is at least as effective as the traditional one" (1980, p. 55). Mean holistic scores for the experimental students rose 22.5%; the control group mean holistic scores rose only 10%. But the drop/fail rate was higher for the experimental group -- 42% compared to 35% for the control group. Just over 65% of the control students successfully completed the course, while only 58% of the experimental group finished successfully. While the Comp-Lab reports are clearly written and provide a good description of the project, the results are quite ambiguous. All groups wrote more words on the posttest, with the experimental groups mean word counts increasing more than the control, indicating greater fluency, but the finding that the holistic scores of the experimental groups started below and rose above the control is clouded by low inter-rater reliability (1980, p.29). Furthermore, the very high failure rate (number of students receiving a failing final grade, plus the number of students dropping the course) further clouds the results by suggesting that the mean holistic scores and mean word counts of the experimental group's posttests were elevated because the poorest writers dropped in large numbers. This interpretation is speculation, for the matter is not explained in any of the Comp-Lab reports.

Since the students were randomly selected for both control and experimental sections, the significantly higher drop rate may indicate that the method simply was not meeting the personal and academic needs of the students. In other words, the students may have found the mechanized Comp-Lab, with its heavy emphasis on grammar and correctness in writing, unable to help them achieve fluency in personal expression and growth in cognitive ability and if Frank Smith (1981b) is right about the dangers of inflexible programs not meeting students' needs, the inflexibility of the Comp-Lab's auto-tutorial method was, in part, to blame for the high failure rate.

Farmer's (1976) doctoral research compared the writing of 60 students in four sections of freshman composition, two sections receiving written comments on their papers and two sections receiving verbal instructor evaluation as the instructor talked with the students about their writing and showed them ways to improve it. Farmer found that the experimental sections improved in overall quality although there were no other differences in the activities of the control and experimental sections. Barbara Tomlinson (1975) studied the effectiveness of three approaches to freshman composition at the University of California at Riverside: conventional classroom, conventional classroom plus lab, and writing lab, finding no great differences except in attitude toward writing. Error counts of pretest and posttest writing samples indicated almost no difference between experimental and control sections, though the mean error rate for each section decreased about 35%; similar error rate decreases were reported by Rakauskas (1973).

A study of 94 basic writers at an Ohio university revealed that 60% of the basic writing students who received supplementary individualized remedial English instruction in addition to classroom instruction completed freshman composition with a C or better, while less than 5% of the 65 control group students who received only the regular classroom instruction in remedial English completed freshman composition with a C or better (Lunsford, 1978). The experimental students increased their T-unit length when revising Hunt's "aluminum" passage (Hunt, 1977) from 10.13 words to 11.62 words in pretest and posttest, and the mean holistic score of the experimental writing sample increased 48%. No pretest holistic scores are given for the control students, but on the posttest, only 9% of the control students scored 4 or above (on a scale of 1 to 6, with 6 the highest) while 53% of the experimental group scored 4 or above. As in the Comp-Lab project (Epes, et al, (1980) a high drop-out rate may influence posttest results because 24% of the 94 subjects in the Lunsford study dropped out before the posttests were administered. Lunsford, recognizing a high attrition rate, offers an unsubstantiated claim: "totally individualized programs should not be used with remedial students" because they need to feel a sense of belonging to a class (p. 19). In other words, they need peer support coming from others in a class or from student-centered instruction that encourages collaborative composing and peer evaluation, instruction that fosters involvement rather than isolation.

Several dissertations have compared conventional instruction with one form or other of individualized instruction, using a variety of measures. Judith Christensen (1980) studied her four sections of

a college business report writing course, two taught by individualized methods and two by conventional classroom methods. The control group received 15 units of instruction by the lecture-discussion method in a conventional classroom environment while the experimental groups received the same 15 units of instruction individually, with student-instructor conferences. Christensen concluded that the method of instruction did not significantly influence scores on the McGraw-Hill Basic Skills Writing Test, Forms A and B, but did influence the scores on the Memo Writing Achievement Test. The control groups scored higher on mechanics and organization while the experimental groups scored higher on content and language usage. Also affected were student attitudes toward the instructional method, as the experimental groups viewed the method they received more favorably than the control groups viewed the traditional lecture-discussion method. Two serious shortcomings of the study are readily evident. The first is that all sections were taught by the same instructor, the investigator. The second is that most of the units of instruction dealt with such lower-level skills as use of pronouns and other surface detail matters.

Burt (1980) studied two 11th-grade composition and literature classes in Pennsylvania, one conducted by an individualized approach and the other by a conventional classroom approach. Burt found no difference in the effectiveness of peer evaluation versus instructor evaluation of written products. He did find that the students in the individualized section had significantly more positive attitudes toward composition than the students in the conventional classroom section, but he found no difference in writing as analyzed by mean T-unit length and punctuation. Unfortunately, Burt's study is marred by the fact

that he was the instructor for both sections involved in the study.

A study comparing laboratory developmental English sections at the University of Scranton showed that all students improved in writing quality as measured by word use, paragraphing, sentence construction, punctuation, and mechanics, regardless of the teaching method (Rakauskas, 1973). The study revealed error-reduction rates of 33% for the laboratory sections and 35% for the classroom sections. On analyzing the test data, Rakauskas concluded both methods to be equally effective. Rakauskas also surveyed the students' attitudes toward the methods and concluded that the students appreciated the increase in instructor-student contact and felt that the amount of writing in the lab sections helped more than anything else to improve their writing.

Some studies of the effects of individualized instruction on the writing of basic writers are clearly conflicting. Gonzales (1976) and Metzger (1975) show that basic writers can benefit from individualized instruction conducted in congenial atmospheres or workshop environments. But Canuteson (1978) and Lunsford (1978) indicate that basic writers should not receive totally individualized instruction because it may foster feelings of isolation.

Roberts (1982a, 1982b, 1983) studied individualized writing instruction and classroom writing instruction at Bluefield State College and Southern West Virginia Community College, comparing the effects of individualized writing instruction and conventional classroom writing instruction at three levels: basic writing and the two semesters of the freshman composition sequence at the two colleges. The effects of the two instructional modes on 124 students' writing apprehension levels and

concepts of the nature of the writing process were also compared. Five hypotheses were tested to determine significant differences in the effects of the two modes of instruction. Three of the hypotheses concerned writing quality as measured by holistic scoring, forced-choice scoring, and mean T-unit length. The other hypotheses concerned writing apprehension and the students' concepts of the nature of writing, as measured by a writing apprehension test (Daly & Miller, 1975) and three questions to determine the level of the students' understanding of writing (Hartwell, 1981). Only one null hypotheses was rejected with 95% confidence. The classroom group wrote significantly longer T-units on the posttest writing sample ($p=.0276$); there were no other differences significant at the .05 level between the effects of the two modes of instruction. Findings of earlier work on the relationship of essay length to holistic scoring (Nold & Freedman, 1977; S. Freedman, 1979; Grobe, 1981) are supported by the data of the Roberts study. The value of holistic scoring in judging writing quality was questioned, and call for future research urged more naturalistic studies that do not rely on holistic scoring as the main means of assessing writing quality (Roberts, 1982a).

Delaney (1980) compared a student-centered, free writing program with a teacher-centered, rhetorical program in a study as part of her doctoral program at Temple University. She found no significant difference in the writing of the experimental and control groups when rated on the criteria of a holistic dichotomous scale discussed in Copper (1977), no significant difference in mean T-unit length for rewrites of Hunt's (1977) "aluminum" passage, and higher maturational changes in the experimental group as measured by Osgood's Semantic

Differential Technique. Delaney's findings correlate well with the research of Calderonello, Heim, Hart, and Quinn (1981), who concluded that a classroom approach to basic writings is at least as effective as individualized instruction, and that topic selection affected the number of words written, mean T-unit length, and holistic scores. Bradshaw (1974) found that teacher selection had greater effect on the outcome of writing in traditional sections than in individualized courses in business report writing. Researchers at Lincoln University (1973) claim success for an individualized, goal-oriented program for English 101 and 102, based on subjective student and instructor surveys and the finding that the students enrolled in individualized courses received higher final grades.

The bulk of the literature concerning individualized, self-paced, or auto-instructional writing courses is subjective and highly interpretive, suggesting a need for further studies of the effectiveness of individualized and classroom modes of instruction. Perhaps incorporating the instruments recently suggested by the CCCC Committee on Teaching and Its Evaluation in Composition (Larson, et al, 1982) and researchers at the University of Texas (Witte, et al, 1983) for evaluation of course and teacher effectiveness will move our discipline toward effective evaluation instruments, and thus toward improvement in the teaching of writing in both individualized and conventional classroom settings.

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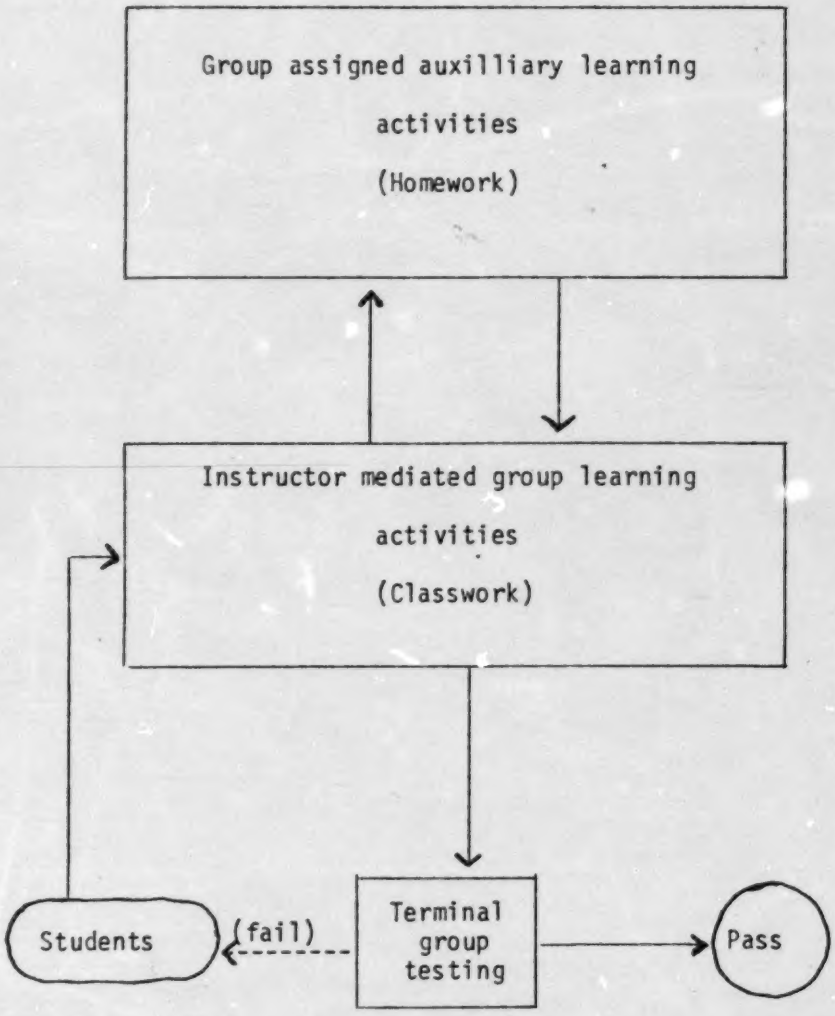

Figure 1

Model of instruction in a conventional college course; learning is defined in terms of group progress (Witte, et al, 1975).

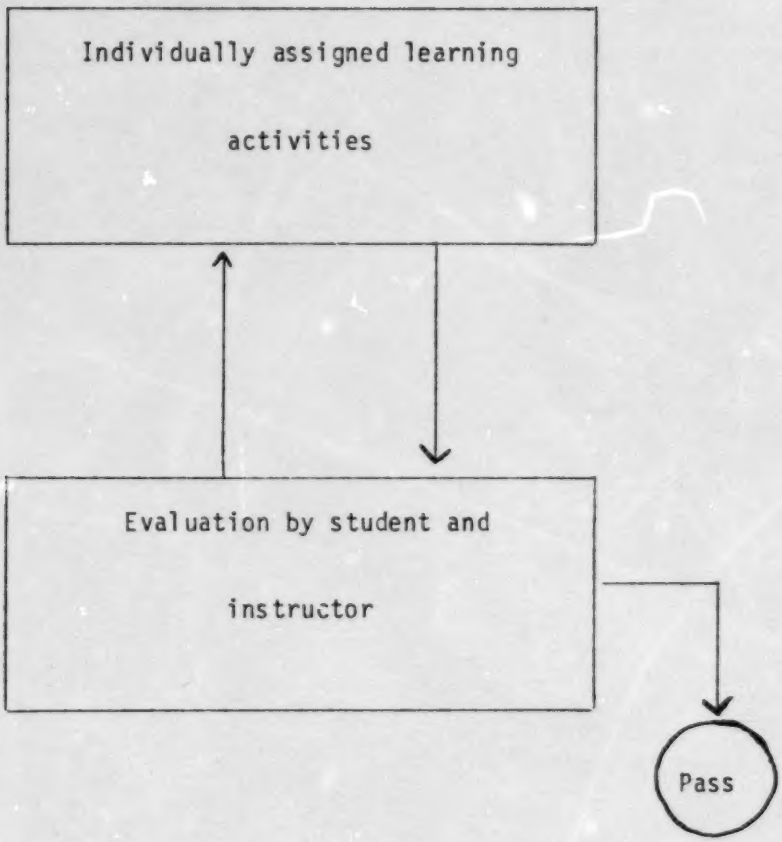

Figure 2

Model of instruction in an individualized college course; learning is defined in terms of individual progress.